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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this publication is to point out that reading comprehension questions frequently assess only literal comprehension, and to suggest kinds of questions that involve broader levels of comprehension. The publication first presents two reading passages; for each one it lists sample questions that involve only literal comprehension and suggests questions that go beyond literal recall of facts and that require pupils to make deductions and inferences, to speculate about the situation presented in the passage, and to enter imaginatively into it. It then presents two passages without questions and invites readers to create a set of questions for each one. Finally, the publication offers suggestions for categorizing comprehension questions according to the involvement of pupils in literal recall, deduction, speculation, imaginative participation, and evaluation; and it lists a few discussion points for school staffs. (GW)

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COMMITTEE ON PRIMARY EDUCATION

Reading Comprehension: The Questions We Ask

SCOLA 8

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THE QUESTIONS WE ASK

A survey of the teaching of language arts in the upper stages of Scottish primary schools - SCOLA SURVEY (1) - indicated that in the course of a week more time was allocated to comprehension exercises in P5 and P7 classrooms than to any other reading activity. Clearly teachers were spending a great deal of time on such tasks and were placing a high educational value on them.

The Bullock Report (2), however, has reservations about the effectiveness and quality of text book exercises designed for the purpose.

"In our view, exercises in English text books or in kits of one kind or another are inadequate for developing comprehension." (8.14)

And furthermore:

"Another short-coming of exercises in many English work books and kits is that they tend to give undue emphasis to literal comprehension." (8.14)

We in SCOLA are also doubtful of the value of much of the comprehension exercise work and, importantly, the amount of time spent on it. This paper does not, however, consider the merits or short-comings of the use of such exercises. The paper does not concern itself in any way with such an important issue as the contexts in which reading may take place. Nor does it attempt any wide coverage of reading skills or abilities. It starts from the point that, for a variety of reasons, teachers in primary schools devote a significant part of their teaching programme in language arts to comprehension exercises. The purpose of the paper is to examine the kind of questions that might follow comprehension passages, whether in text books or kit, or devised by teachers themselves. Its main aim is to suggest that a more varied selection of questions than is found in many comprehension books will help pupils to develop wider ability in reading. It is also worth stressing that the suggested additional questions may be for oral response or discussion and not necessarily for written answers.

What we are examining in this paper is what might be asked and the kind of emphasis that might be put on different levels of comprehension. We illustrate our argument with examples of the kind of short prose passages that are used by teachers at different stages of the primary school. The passages were, however, specially written for this paper.

(1) Craigie College of Education, Ayr - SCOLA SURVEY (A survey of the teaching of Language Arts in the upper stages of Scottish Primary Schools - 1975)

(2) DES - A Language for Life (The Bullock Report) - HMSO - 1975

An examination of most books of comprehension, i.e. books with short prose passages followed by a set of questions for pupils, shows that the questions set tend to

(a) work through the passage from start to finish;

(b) require answers on rather isolated, specific points, the answer being found in a few words in the passage itself. The majority of questions require this 'literal recall' type of answer.

For example:

The Flying Doctor

In parts of Australia the sheep farms are many, many miles distant from each other. The farms may also be hundreds of miles from any town. If anyone on the farm falls ill, there is no doctor or chemist near.

Each farm has a two-way radio. With this radio the farmer can call up the doctor who lives hundreds of miles away. The doctor also has a two-way radio to speak with the farmer. On each farm there is a special medicine chest and in this chest on all farms there are the same kinds of powders, pills and ointments, which have all a number. When the farmer calls up the doctor and tells him what is wrong with a sick person, the doctor tells him to use a medicine with a particular number.

The doctor is called 'the flying doctor' because he also has a plane. In this he can quickly visit any patients who need attention and not just medicine. If a patient needs to go to hospital, the doctor can fly to the farm, collect him in the plane and speedily take him there.

Questions

(1) What country does this passage speak about?

(2) What kind of farm is spoken of here?

(3) How is a 'two-way' radio different from the one in your home?

(4) What three things are in the medicine chest?

(5) What two things are special about the medicines on each farm?

(6) How does the doctor travel to the farms? etc.

If we look at the questions here we can see that they follow the passage step by step and that they are all of the 'literal recall' kind, although it may be argued that (3) requires a little deduction by the pupils. Many of the questions require also an answer in only one or two words.

Of course, there is nothing wrong about this mode of questioning - but it produces one rather narrow and circumscribed kind of reading. It does not really require pupils to <u>think</u> about what they have read, to <u>speculate</u> on what they have read or to <u>enter more imaginatively</u> into the situation dealt with.

To have pupils think about or deduce from what they have read we might ask:

(1) If the doctor has a plane, what would you need beside each farm?

(2) Why not just name each medicine and do without numbers? What other information might the farmer also require about the medicines?

To have pupils think about and speculate on the situation, we might ask:

(3) What do you think the doctor might carry on his plane?

(4) Can you see any difficulties about this service that might not occur in a town?

To have pupils enter more imaginatively into the description, we might ask them to:

(5) Make up a radio conversation between the farmer and the doctor; and/or

(6) Describe how they think a doctor like this might spend a day.

Here is an extract for older pupils.

<u>Scott's Journey to the South Pole</u>

For a long time men had dreamed of reaching the South Pole.

The difficulty was that the South Pole was in the middle of an immense island, more than two thousand miles across, covered with snow and with deep, black crevasses cutting across it in all directions. It had blue mountains of ice many hundreds of feet high. This was not all. It was bitterly cold, with very strong winds all the time and frequent blizzards of driven snow and stinging hail.

At last in 1911, Captain Scott and his men were on their way. They had left members of their party at their base camp on the shore and had now to cover 900 miles. They had one enormous sledge weighing 1000 pounds loaded with tents and stores. It was pulled not by dogs which were used to the cold but by ponies.

Before long troubles started. The ponies soon died and the men had to pull the sledge themselves. Some men were sent back to the base camp and Scott and four others pushed on for the South Pole. They had sometimes to go miles out of their way to avoid crevasses and took far longer than they had hoped to climb the mountains and to get up on the main plateau. Although the weather was very good, they knew that winter storms would soon be starting.

They had another reason for hurrying. Just when they had been about to leave the base camp, they were told that a team from Norway were going to try to reach the Pole from the other side of the island. Scott had had to change plans. He had intended first to collect as much scientific knowledge of the area as he could. Now he knew he had a race on his hands.

Day after day the men staggered on, pulling their huge sledge in the cruel cold. Suddenly one gave a shout. There in front were tracks of men, dogs and sledges!

Two days later, on January 18th, 1912, they reached the South Pole. There they found a tent. In it was a message of greetings and some small gifts. Beside the tent flew the flag of Norway. They had lost the race.

They turned back on their 900-mile trek to the base camp. Then their second fear was realised. The weather broke. Storm followed storm, blizzard followed blizzard. Weakened and dispirited, they trudged on, pulling their sledge, hands and feet badly frostbitten. Some days they managed only a few miles.

One man died in a bad fall. Another became very ill. That night he said, "I am going out. I may be some time." He left the tent in a snowstorm and was not seen again.

At last Scott and the others pitched camp, knowing that they could reach the base camp next day. But their luck had run out. Storms raged so fiercely they could not go on.

Some months later in the spring a search party found their bodies. They were eleven miles from the base camp.

Again, pupils might meet with questions of this kind:

(1) How far was the base camp from the South Pole?

(2) What animals did Scott and his men take with them?

(3) Why would dogs have been better?

(4) Why would it not be easy for men to reach the South Pole?

(5) What two reasons did they have for wanting to be quick?

(6) What date did they reach the South Pole? etc.

Compare the questions that follow with those above:-

(1) How do you know that Scott had meant the expedition to be not only a scientific one?

(2) Why was the sledge so large and heavy?

(3) Why do you think the ponies soon died?

(4) Why did Scott take so few men on the last stage to the Pole?

(5) What do you think was the worst aspect of the journey?

(6) What do you find the saddest part of the story? Why?

Since this story is concerned with human actions it is possible to ask some questions which invite pupils to express some judgments on these actions:

(7) Why do you think the sick man walked out into the snowstorm? If you had been Scott, would you have let him?

(8) Scott was criticised afterwards for his arranging and handling of the expedition - for what reasons do you think? If he could have done so, how might he have replied?

(9) If you had to give this story another title, would you use any of these -

'What a waste!' 'Second Best' 'Courage'? Which might you choose and why? Or is there another you would rather use?

Not all of these questions need be used. However, they are intended to make the pupils think about what they have read and realise that not all answers are to be found directly in the passage - and that there may be more than one answer on particular points. To use only step by step questioning of the 'literal recall' type may lead to very mechanical reading and little pupil involvement. The degree to which a passage allows of deduction or speculation or imaginative involvement in the situation does of course vary with the kind of passage and with the kind of writing involved. Again, if pupils are used to the first form of questioning alone, it takes some time for them to adjust to these other, more exploratory questions.

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The following two passages, one for younger pupils and one for older pupils, have no questions set. The reader is invited to make up for each a set of questions that go beyond 'literal recall', requiring pupils to think about the situation, make deductions and inferences and perhaps enter more imaginatively into the situation.

A Visit to Aunt Mary

David was not very happy at breakfast time. He ate his cornflakes very, very slowly. At times he looked at his football in the corner. Then he looked at the bright sunlight streaming in the window of the kitchen. He seemed sad and bent slowly over his cornflakes again.

Mother watched him. "Come on, David," she said cheerfully. "We'll have to hurry. Aunt Mary is expecting us on the next bus."

"I'm eating as fast as I can," said David, taking a tiny spoonful. "Mummy, do we have to - ? He stopped.

"What did you say, David?" Mother asked.

"Nothing," said David.

Soon, with his face washed and his hair brushed, David was on the bus with Mother. He sat and said nothing. His elbows were on his knees and his face in his hands. He stared at the bus tickets lying on the floor of the bus. Mother looked at him. She said nothing.

They got down from the bus at Aunt Mary's house and went in the front gate. Aunt Mary, smiling, came forward to meet them. With her was a boy about David's age. He carried a football under his arm.

"Hullo, there!" said Aunt Mary. She looked at David's suddenly smiling face. She said, "I asked Roy here to come in and play with you, David. Is that all right?" There was no answer. "David!" she called. But David and Roy had already gone.

Night Patrol

By 1915, during the First World War, the German army faced the British and French armies across a strip of land known as No Man's Land. The soldiers on both sides lived in trenches they had cut in the ground. The enemy trenches were in some places a mile apart and in other places only a hundred yards apart. A few yards in front of each trench was a fence of barbed wire to hold up enemy attacks.

One of the most dangerous jobs for British soldiers was to be sent out on a night patrol. An officer, a sergeant and three or four soldiers would meet together in a trench. Their faces and hands were blackened, they had taken off equipment such as waterbottles, packs and gasmasks and had emptied from their pockets all letters and papers that identified them or their regiment. They were told a password, which was changed every day. They carried a rifle and bayonet - sometimes a club.

Over the front of the trench they crawled and up to the British barbed wire. If there was no gap in the wire, one man held the wire while another cut through it. Then they would crawl or walk stealthily through the shell-holes and mounds of earth in No Man's Land. If the enemy fired a star-shell which burst in the air to light up the battlefield, the men 'froze' - that is, they lay or stood without moving. One of them might carry a ball of white tape to unroll as they went to mark their way back in the darkness.

Their task was to listen for sounds of unusual activity in the German trenches - perhaps the preparations for an attack - or to see if machine-gun positions were being changed or if the Germans were adding to their barbed wire. They would cut the German barbed wire and crawl right up to their trenches to listen. If they saw a German patrol, they would lie still till it passed.

The journey back was just as slow and dangerous - a patrol like this could take three or four hours to cover a few hundred yards. They might not find their way back to the same patch of trench and a nervous British sentry could prove a real peril till he heard the password! Perhaps the men on this patrol would be glad they had not been sent with a larger patrol to bring back a German prisoner for interrogation.

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Teachers might find it of value to assess the balance and variety of questions on reading comprehension in the books they use by categorising questions from sample passages in the following way. Similarly inspection copies of new books can be examined in this way as part of a more general assessment.

A. Literal recall, i.e. the kind of question the answer to which can be supplied by a word or some words in the passage. Examples may take the following forms:

What was the man's name?

Which word is used to describe the dog?

What phrase describes his feelings about the accident?

B. Deduction, i.e. the kind of question in which pupils are asked to infer reason or motive, or work out an answer, without the information being given directly in the passage. Examples may take the following forms:

Why was he so angry at the sight?

Why is it better or necessary to measure out the ingredients before starting?

How would you know Jean was the youngest member of the family?

C. Speculation, i.e. the kind of question where pupils are asked to infer what might have happened if the situation had been changed somewhat or if something else had happened. They are still working partly on evidence given. Questions may take the following forms:

What would he have said if he had lost the race?

What other difficulties could have occurred to prevent success in building?

D. Imaginative Participation, i.e. the kind of question designed to have pupils 'share' imaginatively in what is taking place. Questions may take the following forms:

What would you have done in this situation?

What would you find most difficult to do here?

Is there a part of this you find very saddening?

Which part? Why?

E. Evaluation, i.e. the kind of question where pupils are asked to make some value judgments, mainly about human beings and their actions. Questions may take the following forms:

Do you think he was right to criticise her so severely?

Do you agree that she should be criticised?

Do you think he was wise? Why?

Do you find Mr. X a likeable person? Why or why not?

CHART FOR RECORDING AN ANALYSIS OF QUESTION TYPES

Category	Number of questions asked about passage
A Literal Recall B Deduction C Speculation D Imaginative Participation E Evaluation	

Discussion Points

We hope you have the opportunity in your staff discussions to work through the examples we have given, and to select examples from the reading comprehension material in your own school.

(a) *Do you think it will be necessary to adapt existing written questions to give a different emphasis? If so, how should this be done?*

(b) *How helpful would this exercise be as a contribution to your assessment of possible new textbooks?*

(c) *What implications are there for your oral questioning?*

Conclusion

The skill of the teacher is in deciding on the number and blend of questions appropriate to what is being read and to her knowledge of the individual pupils in the group she is teaching. The kind of question asked can often mark the difference between bringing to the reading situation the thoughtful awareness of the reader and his background of knowledge and experience and a sterile matching of a word or phrase to a question of little or no consequence.

In the teaching of reading the questions we ask are important. We hope that this paper will lead some of us to re-examine what we and our textbooks actually do ask and further to question the time and predominance given to comprehension exercises.

APPENDIX 1

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SCOLA would be interested in having readers' comments in general on how useful this document has been and in hearing in particular of ideas that have been introduced to develop reading comprehension either in any of the ways described in the discussion paper or by any other method. Relevant information should be submitted to:

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